

Inside the biodiversity deal brokered by Canada, China that almost fell apart

The Toronto Star

December 23, 2022 Friday

ONT Replate Edition

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A1

Length: 2985 words

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Body

Dawn was not far off in Montreal, and few at the Palais des Congrès conference centre had slept. Weeks of fractious negotiations had culminated in an all-night crunch to finalize a potentially planet-altering deal.

Helming those talks were two countries whose relationship has never been icier: Canada and China.

Just days before the conference began, the Canadian government had released a strategy document that called China "disruptive," "coercive" and increasingly reluctant to comply with United Nations mandates.

Now, thanks to pandemic disruptions, the two countries were co-steering a UN conference - one with exceptionally high stakes.

Experts described the meeting, COP15, as a last-ditch chance to arrest the collapse of nature, a crisis that risks not only sending a million species into extinction, but fouling the food, water and air humans rely on.

Observers expected talks to grind on for at least another day. But at 3:32 a.m. Monday, China brought down the gavel.

The deal was done.

As negotiators from all over the world headed to bed, the Chinese and Canadian teams passed each other in the hallway. A delegate from China stopped Steven Guilbeault, Canada's environment minister.

"Merci beaucoup," the Chinese delegate said in his best French.

The gesture was "touching," said Guilbeault in a lengthy, exclusive interview with the Star this week. "I think they wanted me to know that they really appreciated the collaboration."

Six months ago it looked as if COP15 might not materialize. Once it was actually underway, observers feared that entrenched geopolitical conflicts would deliver a deal far short of the necessary ambition.

But since its adoption early Monday morning, experts have called the new Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework "transformational."

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In addition to giving the world a real chance at halting and reversing the nature crisis, the agreement codifies the role of Indigenous peoples as primary stewards of conservation, and hints at how international nature funding could be a forum for reparations for colonialism.

It also might represent a tentative thaw in the Canada-China relationship - how lasting or significant remains to be seen.

This is how the historic pact materialized.

COVID-19 has ruined so many parties. And Canada's environment minister had a hunch that it would also spoil the "15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity," the incredibly boring title for an incredibly important summit.

Biodiversity is a technical term for the teeming complexity of life on Earth, and its degradation has enormous consequences.

One landmark report has found that not only are a million species at risk of extinction, but that the pace of those extinctions is accelerating. Scientists have concluded this severe contraction of biodiversity is as profound as the era after an asteroid killed off the dinosaurs.

"It's not hyperbole to say we're experiencing a mass extinction event," said James Snider, WWF Canada's vice-president of science, knowledge and innovation.

Researchers have concluded that at least 30 per cent of the world needs to be protected to prevent the feared consequences.

As the scale of the challenge has ballooned, longstanding attitudes for how to tackle it have shifted. In the past, Indigenous communities were forcibly relocated from lands they have sustainably stewarded for millennia in the name of "pristine" wilderness. It was not only unjust, but ineffective. Eighty per cent of the world's remaining biodiversity exists on Indigenous territories, and achieving ambitious global targets is inconceivable without their leadership.

For all these reasons, the world was in urgent need of a new deal for nature. The plan had been to create one at COP15 in Kunming, China, in October 2020. Then COVID-19 hit, postponing the meeting multiple times.

Earlier this year, China began signalling it would push COP15 to 2023. Many in the international community believed this might be too late.

The stakes were high for Guilbeault, too. In speeches, he sometimes starts sentences with "as a young climate activist," and then later adds some variation of, "I'm no longer young, but I'd like to think I'm still an activist." Twenty-one years ago, he made headlines when he was arrested for scaling the CN Tower to protest Canada's failure to ratify the Kyoto climate change protocol. But today, at 52, he bears political bruises from his former environmentalist colleagues, who have lashed out after decisions he made in government, such as approving an offshore oil project in Newfoundland.

Guilbeault said he asked his officials to look into the possibility Canada might be asked to serve as a backup host, given that the UN's official office for the Convention on Biological Diversity is in Montreal. He said the notion of a Chinese-Canadian partnership was received as a laughable impossibility.

"Everyone said, 'You know, minister, we really like you, but you're kind of out of your mind. There's no way this is happening,' " Guilbeault recalled.

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Diplomatic relations between Canada and China were cleaved apart in December 2018, when Chinese telecom executive Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Vancouver over a U.S. extradition request. Weeks later, the Communist regime imprisoned Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, detentions that Ottawa labelled "hostage diplomacy."

But even as the relationship between the two countries deteriorated, discussions about climate and the environment were the most resilient, according to a senior government official: sometimes talks were delayed, but they never totally died off.

"I think China also sees that if they don't address the climate and the environmental crisis, it's going to have a significant impact on their citizens," the official said.

In May, China officially requested COP15 take place in Montreal. Guilbeault said that by that point, he had already been trying to secure potential space at the Palais des Congrès.

Then, in early June, Guilbeault travelled to Stockholm for a separate international meeting. One night, he was invited to a private dinner with representatives from several countries, including the U.K., Norway, the U.S., Gabon, Costa Rica and Ecuador, he recalled.

All of these countries belonged to the so-called High Ambition Coalition, a group of nations that agreed to push for the protection of 30 per cent of the world's land and sea by 2030, a target that soon came to be referred to as "30 by 30." Over Swedish delicacies at an ornate, 19th century restaurant in Stockholm's swanky Östermalm district, they made a plea.

"Basically, that dinner was an appeal by all of them to ask me if we would be willing to host COP15," Guilbeault said.

Returning to Canada, Guilbeault said, he went to his boss, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly to make an "impassioned pitch" for Canada to host the summit and work with Beijing to land a deal.

But, in his mind, it was still a long shot.

"It was a huge gamble," Guilbeault said. Essentially, "we have no diplomatic relations with China. They would be the presidency of this thing; by then, we had like five months to organize this - it takes usually at least a year, sometimes two.

"So what's not to like about this proposal?"

With Joly backing him up, Guilbeault told the prime minister the effort could be a way to start rebuilding bridges with China, he said.

"In the end, the boss said yes," Guilbeault said.

Trudeau's approval made it official: COP15 was coming to Montreal.

As staff began the Herculean task of preparing for the arrival of 18,000 delegates from all over the world, Guilbeault began meeting virtually with his Chinese counterpart, Environment Minister Huang Runqiu.

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Initially, "it was courteous, but it wasn't super warm," Guilbeault said, describing the first few meetings as "very scripted," with Huang literally reading from prepared text. But, as time went by, Guilbeault said, he "got the feeling that (Huang) was doing less and less of that, and we were having more of a conversation."

As the summit began in early December, Guilbeault arrived at the Montreal airport to greet the plane carrying Huang and the Chinese delegation. Upon landing, the Chinese minister joked about not sleeping on the long flight to escape jet lag. "He was clearly very happy to be there," Guilbeault said.

Even more encouraging was the fact that, according to Guilbeault, Huang immediately agreed to his request to meet regularly during the summit - something Guilbeault said he'd asked already through their respective bureaucracies but had not received a response.

Guilbeault knew China was interested in Guilbeault's contacts with a range of countries with whom he communicated closely, often through a group chat on WhatsApp with more than 30 other environment ministers from all over the world.

"In our first meeting in Montreal, the Chinese minister ... said to me: 'As the host country, I understand that people will come to you naturally, and it would be great for me if we could exchange information that you have.' And so he was clearly signalling that he wanted to have a close working relationship," Guilbeault said.

The question was whether that would be enough.

It was midway through the final week of negotiations in Montreal, and environmental groups at the summit were sounding panicked.

Not only was the draft of the long-awaited new deal far weaker than they had called for, sections of the agreement were even less ambitious than the previous, failed plan.

The actual mechanics of a planet-saving summit can, it turns out, be aggressively dull. Hundreds of delegates gather in cavernous, windowless conference rooms of a centre in downtown Montreal, where the draft agreement is pulled up on a huge screen. Anything in brackets indicates wording that is still up for debate. Delegates will spend hours, even days, arguing about whether to move a list of industries to the glossary, or to switch an "and" for an "as well as."

With just days left to find a deal, hundreds of questions remained. The most concerning, for many, was over the 30-by-30 target. Language recognizing Indigenous rights was also in flux. Just before 1 a.m. one night, Brazil had led a walkout of likeminded developing countries after a dispute over "resource mobilization" - money - halting negotiations for most of the day.

"The whole discussion is on the precipice," Innocent Maloba, a senior specialist at WWF International, told reporters at the Palais. The deal, he said, is "on the brink of breakdown."

Behind the scenes, two camps were locked in an international logjam.

On one side, developing countries such as Brazil, Argentina and a group of African countries were demanding to know who was going to help pay for protecting nearly a third of the world.

On the other side, developed countries - particularly the European Union - balked at the sums of money, arguing there were not enough conservation plans to absorb all that cash. Many countries wanted to see a commitment to big ambition before handing out big money.

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For Valérie Courtois, director of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative, these fights about targets and funding, while important, obscured the real stakes.

"Places where that high biodiversity exists are also the places where we find the worst poverty," she said, sitting in the conference centre hallway one day.

Most of the planet's remaining intact nature exists in the global south: of the world's 17 most "megadiverse" countries, 15 are developing ones.

Within Canada, Courtois pointed out, landscapes such as the Hudson and James Bay Lowlands, a globally important peatland carbon sink, are also home to deeply marginalized First Nations. This pact was really a form of "social justice," she said, creating "healthy cultures and healthy relationships with these landscapes."

There had been one formidable and crucial holdout on the 30-by-30 target: China.

Guilbeault recalled that, in meetings, his Chinese counterpart never directly rejected or embraced the target, but seemed to imply they did not agree with it.

Guilbeault knew that China's endorsement of the goal would go a long way. With its sway over Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, China could align a host of new nations with the High Ambition Coalition.

It was a delicate dance.

"I was trying to make them understand that we weren't trying to jam them with this, but it was the scientific recommendation that we needed to do that," he said.

Around the middle of last week, Guilbeault said he felt a shift in China's position. He was meeting with Huang in the country's temporary offices at the Palais when he noticed it: Huang had dropped his wording about being "realistic" with the targets.

But the deal was not done.

Over the final weekend of the summit, some developed countries were still pushing back on demands for clear and increased financing of conservation efforts in developing nations. Guilbeault said he asked Trudeau to reach out to other leaders to help "untie this knot."

On Sunday, the second last day of the conference, China had produced a draft deal that - surprisingly, to Guilbeault - seemed to have relatively broad support. It included the 30-by-30 target. It contained strong language on Indigenous rights and leadership. And it provided \$20 billion in financing from donor countries to the global South by 2025, and \$30 billion by 2030.

Given the mess the text had been in, everyone expected talks to extend into the next week. But China decided to try to get the deal passed that night.

A final meeting to adopt the text was postponed, and then postponed again. There was a final, late-night scuffle over a wayward "of." Finally, Huang brought down the gavel just after 3:30 a.m.

The funding package was far less than what developed countries had initially called for. And even Guilbeault has said that 30 per cent of the planet is the minimum necessary.

But "it ends up being about a package," he said.

Inside the biodiversity deal brokered by Canada, China that almost fell apart

"People were willing to go beyond their comfort zone on financial commitment, because they felt that we were getting a lot of ambition - more ambition than everyone thought we would get."

Shortly after the agreement was finalized, as the clock neared 4 a.m., the delegate from Namibia laid bare the subtext of the core arguments at the summit.

"This is my last meeting, so I speak freely. I don't care, actually, what anyone thinks," said Pierre du Plessis, addressing the entire convention.

The Democratic Republic of Congo had just raised a last-minute funding objection that threatened to destabilize the whole agreement.

"I have great sympathy for my colleague from the DRC," du Plessis said.

"He comes from probably one of the most brutalized countries in the world. Those of you who have read Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' would recall that the Belgian colonizers in the Congo chopped off the hands of people that were not tapping enough rubber to meet their quotas.

"That colonial injustice that is exemplified by what happened in the Congo is the origin of all of the problems that we have encountered in this convention, and in the relationship between humanity and biodiversity."

These issues would not be resolved, du Plessis said, without a much deeper dialogue over the history of violence towards nature and people that allowed "developed" countries to become wealthy, and others to remain locked in poverty.

It was messy, it was imperfect, but it was a deal - one that, for experts and environmentalists, at least paves the way to possible success in saving the planet's biodiversity.

Guilbeault reflected on how China and Canada managed to work together to pull it off.

"I think we both decided that, despite some of our differences or disagreements, this was to our mutual benefit that we can work together on these issues, and maybe even to the benefit of the world."

At least, that's the hope.

Now that the deal is done, the pressure has shifted from the diplomatic push for an accord to the political realities of implementing it.

Guilbeault has promised to set an international example by tabling legislation that would enshrine the targets outlined in the deal, including protecting 30 per cent of the country by 2030, in law. He made the surprise pledge partway through the Montreal summit, prompting praise from a host of environmental groups.

Guilbeault also admitted that he still needs to formally convince the power brokers in his own government that it's the right move - including Trudeau himself and the Liberal cabinet.

"I wouldn't say I have the green light," Guilbeault said. "But I would not have said that publicly if I wasn't given some assurances that a lot of people liked the idea."

The federal government has already begun to make Indigenous-led conservation a priority, pledging \$800 million to create four new areas at COP15 and announcing a new national Indigenous Guardians program, the first of its kind worldwide.

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Provincial and territorial governments have authority over vast swathes of Crown land, and will also need to be brought on board. Guilbeault noted some are keener than others.

Indigenous leaders who travelled to Montreal have returned home - for Courtois, not soon enough. She admitted she had avoided the bland conference halls as much as possible, focusing on conversations instead.

When she had braved their oppressive dullness, though, she wore a pair of earrings with a cross-section of caribou horn and a thatch of porcupine quills - a connection to the land.

"I'm an Innu person. I can't imagine a world where caribou doesn't exist on our lands because I don't know, then, what would make me Innu in many ways. Our whole understanding of our place in the world revolves around our relationship with caribou and its landscape.

"It's critical. And our very survival depends on it."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: BIODIVERSITY (90%); CONFERENCES & CONVENTIONS (90%); BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION (89%); ENVIRONMENTAL DEPARTMENTS (89%); ENVIRONMENTAL LAW (89%); INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (89%); NEGATIVE NEWS (89%); UNITED NATIONS (89%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (89%); AGREEMENTS (78%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (78%); INTERVIEWS (78%); LIFE FORMS (78%); PLANETS & ASTEROIDS (78%); POLITICAL & SOCIAL IDEOLOGIES (78%); TALKS & MEETINGS (78%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (77%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (76%); PREHISTORIC LIFE (73%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (70%); COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS (70%); INFECTIOUS DISEASE (70%); ENVIRONMENTAL TREATIES & AGREEMENTS (68%); INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (68%); TREATIES & AGREEMENTS (61%)

Geographic: MONTREAL, QC, CANADA (73%); EARTH (79%); CHINA (96%); CANADA (94%)

Load-Date: December 23, 2022